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THE PLANTATION AS A CIVILIZING FACTOR.

As a feature of the present wave of prosperity in the cotton belt, there is to be noted a movement just beginning for the reestablishment of plantations to replace the small farms in the production of the staple crops. The origin of the movement is due to the economic motive, and from the economic point of view it seems fully justified. It is a movement for the use of more capital and better implements, for the avoidance of debt and obligations, for the improvement of methods of cultivation, and for the use of skilled management in the superintendence of wage-earning labor. It is therefore a movement of progress from the stagnation of demoralized industry in the recent past toward a more effective system for the future. Together with the recent great upgrowth of cotton factories, it indicates that the South is now becoming more fully alive to the spirit of specialized and systematized industry which is elsewhere prevalent in modern America.

It appears to be fairly beyond denial, in view of the ignorance and improvidence of the great laboring class in the South, that a system for the organization of labor under skilled management is desirable in agriculture as well as in mining, commerce, and manufacturing. From the point of view of the modern economic world, which demands productiveness as a condition of life, the plantation system when thoroughly understood cannot fail to be approved as at least a partial cure for the inefficiency of labor in the South under the present régime of small farmers. The question remains, what will be the effect of the system upon the mental, moral, and indus-

trial development of the negro? and this social aspect of the matter will receive our present attention.

In all inquiries of this sort, theories of abstract right and wrong must give place to considerations of what is wise and advisable in reaching the best future results. The question of the inherent rights of men is in no way involved. The question of the equality of men does not pertain. The vital question is, How can improvement be made in industrial conditions, known to be unsatisfactory, and how is civilization to be promoted among the mass of Southern negroes who are beyond question in need of further and higher development? The clash of the abstract theories of the abolitionist school against the blind resistance of the Bourbons of the South has wrought such terrible havoc in the past that men should be prepared to inquire into conditions and methods of remedy in a broad-minded spirit, seeking the truth of to-day and the policy of wisdom for to-morrow, no matter what pet theories may go to the wall.

The conditions of our problem are as follows: 1. A century or two ago the negroes were savages in the wilds of Africa. 2. Those who were brought to America, and their descendants, have acquired a certain amount of civilization, and are now in some degree fitted for life in modern civilized society. 3. This progress of the negroes has been in very large measure the result of their association with civilized white people. 4. An immense mass of the negroes is sure to remain for an indefinite period in the midst of a civilized white nation. The problem is, How can we best provide for their peaceful residence and their further progress in this nation of white men? and how can we best guard against their lapsing back into barbarism? As a possible solution for a large part of the problem, I suggest the plantation system.

Two contrasting types of plantations developed upon American soil through the adapting of European institutions to the new geographical conditions. In the West Indies the policy of the Spaniards was to exploit the land through the forced labor of the subjugated natives.¹ Large gangs of Indian slaves

¹ H. C. Lea, "The Indian Policy of Spain," in the *Tale Review*, vol. 8, p. 119.

were compelled to work in the mines, upon the roads, and in the sugar cane fields. The system of slavery was so extremely harsh that within a few decades the native population of the West Indies had become diminished to within perhaps a tenth of its original numbers. Distressed by this terrible state of things, the Spanish priest Las Casas suggested, about 1518, that negro slaves be imported from Africa to relieve the unbearable hardships of the natives. In quick acceptance of this idea, thousands of negroes were rapidly poured into the West Indies, where they were largely employed in sugar production. When the English settled Barbadoes, in 1625, and captured Jamaica, in 1655, they borrowed from the Spaniards the system of plantations which the Spaniards had already developed.

These plantations in the English West Indies were of the commercial type, where the predominating purpose of the planter was to get money, and to get it as rapidly as possible. West Indian planters lived in the islands merely for the time being. When they had established their plantations upon a paying basis, they usually left them to overseers and went back to England to spend their income. While the men were making their fortunes in the tropics their mothers and wives and children were mostly at home in England; English families as a rule did not establish English homes upon the West Indian plantations. The proportion of whites in the population of Jamaica and Barbadoes remained very small; for instance, in 1768 Jamaica had about 17,000 whites and 167,000 negroes. The negroes were not in close enough touch with the whites to be able to adopt their civilization with any degree of rapidity. There were few white families to set examples for the blacks; and in consequence polygamy, paganism, and other savage customs were long continued among the West Indian negroes. Fresh negroes from Africa were so cheap that for pure money-making it appears to have been cheaper to work the slaves to exhaustion and buy new ones, than to make any thorough endeavor to increase the enlightenment and the efficiency of the negroes at hand. And in fact the West Indian conditions were so severe as to require constant importations to prevent the stock of negroes from diminishing.

In 1670 a band of settlers, partly from England and partly from Barbadoes, established the colony at Charleston, S. C. These settlers brought with them the West Indian system of plantations, and in the following years extended it throughout the sea-island sections of South Carolina and Georgia. Yet certain modifications were introduced. Whereas the Jamaica sugar estates averaged about one hundred and eighty slaves to the plantation,² the Carolina rice and indigo plantations were found to be most profitable when there were only about thirty negroes under one manager.³ Again, the South Carolinians soon came to look upon the colony as their home, and on their estates they established homes upon the English pattern. The planters could live on their estates for only the cooler months of each year; but that residence of even a few months gave the negroes an opportunity to bring their imitative faculties into play and to seize many ideas of civilization. Yet on the whole, the Carolina coast plantation was too nearly of the commercial type for the negro to secure the most rapid progress.

In the colony of Virginia the resort to white indented servants and the discovery of the value of tobacco production caused the development of the system of patriarchal plantations before the negro became a factor in the situation. The plantation there was not borrowed from the Spaniards, but was developed as a modification of the old English institution of the manor. Involuntary labor was used because labor of any sort was profitable, and hired labor was not to be had so long as there was abundance of free land on the outskirts of settlement. The chief desire of the substantial men of Virginia was to live as English gentlemen lived. They soon found that by resorting to indentured white servants, and later to negro slaves, instead of to serfs, hired labor, and manorial tenants, they could establish themselves in something very

² Bryan Edwards, "History of the West Indies," Book 2, Appendix 1.

³ B. R. Carroll, "Historical Collections of South Carolina," vol. 2, p. 202. See also the report upon the archives of Georgia, in the forthcoming "Report of the American Historical Association for 1903."

much like the English manor system, and could gain an honest competence as landowners and managers of agricultural labor.

Negroes gradually replaced the white servants in this system, without causing any substantial change in the general organization. The desire of the planters was not so much to make money and vaunt it in England like the nabobs of the Indies, but to live in comfort as English gentlemen. The Virginians early became noted for generosity, hospitality, and kindness; and their virtues were not shown to their white guests exclusively. The planters and their families were in close personal association with a large proportion of their servants; and these negroes in the Virginia system of patriarchal plantations had an extraordinary opportunity to acquire habits of industry and the forms of English civilization. A very instructive consideration is that, whereas in the West Indies among able-bodied slaves a freshly imported African would bring about the same price as a negro born and reared upon a sugar plantation, in Virginia even before the eighteenth century a home-grown negro was considered nearly twice as valuable as a fresh African. This contrast gives forcible illustration of the efficiency of the Virginia training school.

The Virginia system of plantations was extensively adopted in America before the West Indian system appeared upon the Carolina coast, and it always remained by far the more prevalent of the two. By the time of the American Revolution these patriarchal plantations had become established through tidewater and piedmont Virginia, Maryland, and eastern North Carolina. The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 led to the rapid extension of the same system throughout the uplands of the lower South.

While the cotton belt was being settled society in it was rough, vigorous, and democratic. White men labored hard to earn money to buy slaves, and many of them afterwards worked hard in the cotton furrows alongside their slaves. The indolent, shiftless poor whites were scorned by industrious white men and negroes alike. The slaves, far from the extreme of abjectness, gained self-respect and acquired admirable

qualities. When prosperity prevailed and wealth came, the slaves were usually in some degree the beneficiaries from the improvement in their masters' circumstances.

The average size of cotton plantations remained relatively small. The United States census of 1860 shows that a holding of twelve negroes of all ages was decidedly above the average in the cotton belt. It was most common for one white family to own one or two or three negro families, who lived in cabins near by, and were in constant association with their master and mistress and the white children. The aim of the planter was to have his force of laborers reach the greatest possible degree of efficiency. This purpose was to be gained only by training the negroes and guarding their health and strength from injury through overwork or dangerous occupation of any sort. When in the middle of the nineteenth century the price of able-bodied negroes mounted up to about \$1,500, it became too great a money risk to require one of them to perform a dangerous or exhausting task. And in fact we find records of many instances where planters hired *Irish* immigrants to dig ditches and do other straining work in order to protect the negroes from risk of injury. Slaves were too expensive to use in such tasks when Irishmen could be hired. The great majority of planters were kind masters from interest and inclination, looking after the moral and industrial development of their slaves as a matter of business as well as from higher motives. On the other hand, there were doubtless a large number of instances of harsh masters and maltreated slaves. In fact, the dark side of *ante-bellum* conditions was somber enough to cast a heavy gloom over the bright; but the evil features were due chiefly to the institution of slavery and not to the system of plantation industry.

The planters of the Old South, within the lifetime of a few generations, developed a fairly efficient body of laborers out of a horde of savages. The negroes became fairly honest, industrious, and intelligent; and even though this may have been at the cost of their sturdiness, initiative, and self-control, the net results were surprisingly good. On the whole, the system of the Old South, with all its limitations, accomplished a good work,

which it was perhaps not fitted to carry further. The slavery system had completed its work and was already becoming an anachronism when the Civil War and Reconstruction overthrew it, and with it all system in the South. There followed a period of great social upheaval and industrial demoralization, which was partly remedied by a temporary resort to small farms and tenant cropping.

But none who were well informed have expected that the average negro, with his inevitable shortcomings, would make a successful independent farmer without a large additional amount of training. The plantations were broken up, and the negroes have in name been working for themselves and by themselves. But in truth they have continued to be under the supervision of the landowners and the merchants, who act in some measure as non-resident planters. But this system of absentee control has such serious faults that it cannot permanently stand. The supervision over the so-called negro farmers is unsystematic, and the economic results are lamentably small. And, still worse, the isolation upon their separate farms is proving injurious to the higher development of the negroes themselves.

The civilization which our negroes have now partly acquired is English civilization, gained from association with the English race. They have advanced exclusively by the help and through their imitation of the Anglo-Americans.

Without the continuance of the inter-racial association there is strong reason to believe that the negroes would gradually lose much of the praiseworthy element in their present attainments. In fact several keen-sighted students have already detected a tendency of the negroes, where segregated in masses in the black belt, to lapse back toward barbarism. Of course, if its prevention is possible, such retrogression must not be allowed to continue. That it has not yet grown more serious is due to the policy pursued by the better element of the white people; for they have followed the traditions of their fathers in practicing the truest charity while letting not their left hands know what their right hands have been doing. Their extreme reticence in publishing their deeds has been a

mistake which in future should be avoided. The South has long been held in a false position of hostility to the negro, while in actual truth the conservative, thinking, God-fearing element among the Southern people have been and still remain the most substantial, practical, and valuable friends that their black neighbors have ever had. Before the war their families, dwelling in the midst of their negro quarters, did what we call, in the modern phrase, social settlement work. In later years they have continued that work of guidance, instruction, and inspiration as best they could under the adverse conditions resulting from the work of the carpetbaggers. For the future, the exceptional negroes may take care of themselves, the Northern negroes and those in the South who yearn for the higher literary education may be provided for by the Northern philanthropists; but the great mass of the black population will for generations remain dependent as before upon the friendship and helpfulness of their best white neighbors.

To secure the best results for all parties, a more sympathetic relationship must be established, which shall include larger numbers of both races. And no system for this purpose has yet been developed which compares in good results with that of the old patriarchal plantation. The patriarchal feature is necessary. The average negro has many of the characteristics of a child, and must be guided and governed, and often guarded against himself, by a sympathetic hand. Non-resident ownership and control of plantations will not do. The absentee system has no redeeming virtue for the purpose at hand. With hired, voluntary labor instead of forced labor, it is the Virginia plantation system and not that of the West Indies which is needed. The presence of the planter and his wife and children and his neighbors is required for example and precept among the negroes. Factory methods and purely business relations will not serve; the tie of personal sympathy and affection is essential to the successful working of the system. The average negro longs for this personal tie. Respect, affection, and obedience for those who earn and encourage his admiration are second nature with him. The negroes are disposed to do their part for securing the general

welfare when the proper opportunity is given them. What they most need is friendly guidance and control for themselves, and peace and prosperity for the South as a whole; economic depression will always work to their discouragement and injury, and sectional and racial irritation must in every case check their progress.

It is generally conceded that the concentration of the negroes in cities gives more opportunity for the increase of depravity among them than for their progress in civilization; for it puts the average negroes into close association with the worst element of their own race and with the vicious class of the whites as well. Life in the country offers less glittering but more substantial attractions, and the system there may easily be arranged to meet all the actual needs of the average negroes. As is true with large numbers of whites, but in greater degree, the negroes are in less need of literary education than of practical knowledge and genuine wisdom. They need to become well-developed men and women, and not half-baked scholars. The Southern plantation, with its product of Washington, Jefferson, the Pinckneys, Lowndes, Calhoun, Troup, and Yancey, needs no eulogy as a school of manhood. Under modern conditions, with the negroes possessing their freedom, the plantation should prove a school for black men as well as white.

The exceptional negroes should feel no call to work as hired plow hands; their usefulness lies elsewhere. As the race progresses, more and more of its members will graduate from the school of the plantation and become self-directing units in our general American system. But for many generations there will probably remain a large enough number of "natural born" plow hands to keep a multitude of planters profitably busy with their superintendence.

The exceptional negro is in advance of the average negro because he has acquired a greater amount of the white man's civilization. He is prepared in many cases to educate the average negro up to a somewhat higher plane. But while the exceptional negro has acquired this capability by borrowing and adapting the white man's ways of life, the average and the

exceptional white men possess their civilization and their capability as a natural inheritance. To contend that the educated negro is the best source of guidance and enlightenment for the average negro in the American system is to argue that the reflected light of the moon is brighter and more effective than the direct rays of the sun. To urge that the negroes should be sent back to Africa to work out their own salvation is to hold with Rousseau that the state of nature (savagery) is the highest existence for man, and that our own system of law and order and industry and progress is useless as a pattern for any backward race.

From the point of view of morality, industry, intelligence—of everything that civilization means—the segregation of the negroes must work to their detriment. Their concentration in city slums is vicious; their isolation from white neighbors in the black belt of the seacoast cannot cease to mean stagnation, if not retrogression, for them; the race prejudice taught them by the carpetbaggers was and is a positive injury; their general aloofness upon small farms must insulate them in large measure from the best influences for progress in the South of to-day. The most feasible means of general betterment lies in building up a system of plantations of moderate size, where the negro may take his place in the modern world of specialized and organized industry and yet have the protection from the harsher features of the modern strife, which will be afforded him by the patriarchal character of the system of which he is a part.

The process of building up these modern plantations must needs be in a measure slow and beset with obstacles, but the obstacles can hardly be of insuperable character. A conviction of the shortcomings of the present system of renting and cropping must be brought home to the South as a whole, or at least to the cotton belt which is the heart of the modern agricultural South, and, in truth, this conviction is already prevalent with a large proportion of thinking Southerners. There are surely a large number of men who understand negro management and who can master the best methods of agriculture for the South; and thousands of these men are already at

hand, or are prepared to fit themselves for the work, as soon as the movement gains sufficient headway to attract their energies. The mass of the negroes must be taught that good wages on a plantation are better than debt and failure, or even partial success upon their half-independent, ill-tended small farms, and still better than indolence and vice in the towns. A great mass of the white people have already learned of the superior attractiveness of steady wages over their meager and uncertain farm returns, and the teaching of a similar lesson to the negroes should not prove impossible. True, a large amount of capital will be needed for investment in land, houses and stock, ditches and terraces, machinery, wages, and supplies; but the present high price of cotton and the general flow of capital into the South in recent years must soon supply a fund to meet this need. Finally, a substantial beginning is necessary in the movement, and examples must be set of successful enterprise in this line in each district in the South in order to overcome the inherited conservatism of the people. But there are already a number of individual examples being set at various points in the cotton belt, and the system itself has been familiar to the people from days of old.

While a certain class of theorists have been proclaiming the virtues of small farms and independence for the negroes, a scattered handful of practical men of affairs have set to work in building up plantations whereon they may establish themselves in prosperity and at the same time relieve a portion of the mass of negroes from their distress and indecision. The movement thus begun is gathering headway. It is attracting capable white men back to the soil, and must soon begin to draw the surplus negroes out of the towns. The movement should be studied on the ground and encouraged as a solution for many of the difficulties of the racial situation and as a means of progress for a whole tier of the Southern States.

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